

Film Language

Camera angles and movements combine to create a sequence of images, just as words, word order, and punctuation combine to make the meaning of a sentence. The following is the accepted set of key terms to describe them.

When describing different cinematic shots, different terms are used to indicate the amount of subject matter contained within a frame, how far away the camera is from the subject, and the perspective of the viewer. Each shot has a different purpose and effect.

The Shot

- The building block of all filmmaking
- A single, uninterrupted piece of film
- The image seen on screen until it is replaced by another image

Framing

The extreme long shot

- Often referred to as **the establishing shot**
- Can be taken from as much as a quarter of a mile away
- Can establish a scene so viewer knows where a scene will take place
 - e.g. Manhattan skyline, full view of White House
- Normally shows an exterior
- Often used to show scenes of thrilling action
 - Battle scenes
- There is very little detail visible in the shot
- Meant to give a general impression rather than specific information



The long shot

- Shows the image as approximately “life” size
- Corresponds to the real distance between the audience and the screen
 - A man appears six feet tall
 - Shows entire human body



Medium shot

- Between a long and a close-up
- Usually seen from waist-up
- Most common and naturalistic of all shots since most common to our real lives
- Also called “*neutral shot*”
- Can show more setting and context than a close-up but lacks the detail
- Brings the viewer closer to the subject than the long shot



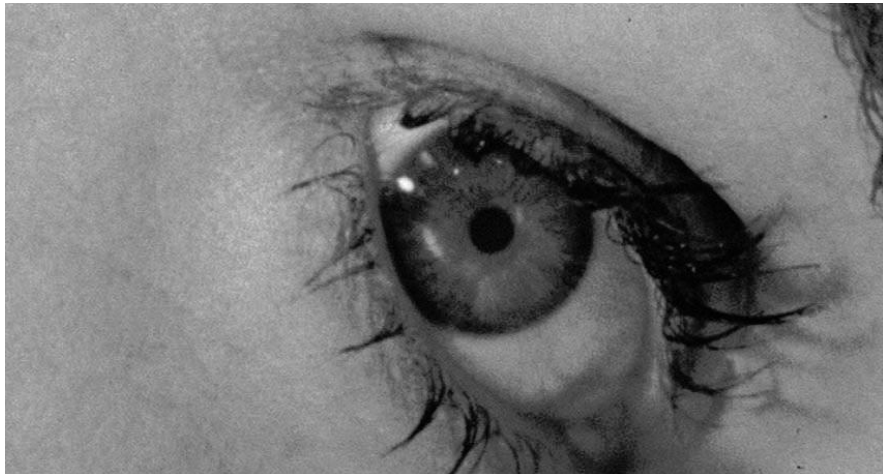
The close-up

- Object of subject takes up nearly 80% of screen space
- Used to direct the viewer to something important
 - Facial expression, tear, clue in a detective story
- Can only see what the director intends
- We are not allowed to see the entire scene
- Unique to cinema – not available in theater



Extreme Close-up

- Generally magnifies beyond what the human eye would experience in reality
- ECU of a face would show only mouth or eyes



Common set-up

1. Establish the scene with a long shot
2. Move into a medium shot
3. Then, if necessary, use a close-up

Has the impression of getting closer to the subject

Director can of course break convention

Focus

Soft focus

- Subject slightly out of focus (blurry)
- Romantic films – creates a lighter mood
- Also used to communicate uncertainty



Sharp focus

- Brilliant clarity
- High degree of realism



Rack focus

- Brings either the background or foreground into focus
- Shows changing relationships within a single scene, without having to cut from the shot
- A character (in focus) in the background is pacing around the room. The phone rings. The character goes out of focus and the phone is now in focus. We know the call is important
- Director forces the viewer's attention where the director wants them to look



Deep focus

- Orson Welles
- All objects in background and foreground remain in focus
- Shows relationship between characters and objects in environment
- Gives a greater sense of reality since in real life we choose what we want to look at



Angles

Bird's Eye View

- Shows a scene from directly overhead
- Unnatural and strange angle
- Puts the audience in a godlike position, looking down on the action
- People can be made to look insignificant, ant-like, part of a wider scheme of things



High angle

- The camera is above the subject (can use a crane “crane shot”)
- Subject appears weak, powerless, and trapped
- Can seem swallowed up by surroundings
- Less in control



Eve level

- No immediate significance
- Another sort of *neutral shot*
- Most common shot – “medium shot – eye level”



Low angle

- The camera is below the subject
- Subject appears huge, powerful, dominating, and in control
- Size and strength can appear exaggerated



Dutch angle

- Subject and camera are tilted to the side
- Image appears sideways, to an extent” in the frame
- Used in horror and gangster to show evil character of dangerous situation
- Can create tension or imply moral uncertainty
- Lets us know all is not well and the situation will soon explode



Camera Movement

Pan

- Camera moves left to right (pivots on horizontal axis)
- Camera does not move, only the head
- Often left to right (natural for Western viewers)
- Can become the point of view of the characters

Tilt

- Camera moved up and down (pivots on vertical axis)
- Camera does not move, only the head
- Communicates distance, size, and strength
- A character preparing to climb a mountain (starts at bottom and moves to top)
- A male character focusing of leg of woman and slowly moving up to reveal the rest of her

Zoom

- Focal length of the lens changes
- Object appears closer or further away
- Directs our attention to a detail

Tracking or Dolly shots

- True movement of the camera
- Moves us through the space of the film
- We go with the action
- Camera may be on a truck, track, or helicopter

Hand-held Shots

- Started being used during WWII; never truly caught on; can be shaky
- 1970s – invention of the Steadicam – makes it possible to travel around using a portable camera (Rocky going up the steps, boy riding bike in *The Shining*)
- Both hand-held and Steadicam are used to give a realistic feel
 - Opening of *Saving Private Ryan*

Editing

Putting all the various shots together

Most common type – a *cut* – change between two different shots

Fade

- Image on screen fades away
- Screen is black or some other color
- New image slowly fades onto screen
- Can be used to show time has passed

Dissolve

- Image on screen slowly fades away
- Instead of fading all the way out, another image slowly fades in
- Makes a connection between two objects or characters

Crosscut

- Shows events occurring in different spaces are happening simultaneously
- Also used to create suspense (i.e. *Godfather*)

Flashback

- Conventions of a flashback in movie
 - Character begins narrating a story
 - Look up or through a window
 - Non-diegetic music may fade in
 - Shot dissolves into another scene, usually still with voice-over

Eye-Line Match/Reaction Shot

- Shot of person looking
- Cut to what he or she saw
- Cut back for a reaction
 - Can reveal what a character was thinking
 - Manipulation by the director
 - His job is to make us feel for the characters



Match Cut

- A familiar relationship between the shots may make the change seem smooth



Editing rhythm and duration

Average shot is 8 – 10 seconds
Some are longer or shorter

Rope by Hitchcock – movie is 8 – ten minute takes (there are only 8 cuts in the entire movie)

Long take (takes skill)

Touch of Evil by Orson Welles
Three minute tracking shot – sets up film

The Player by Robert Altman
Eight minute tracking shot

Boogie Nights by Paul Thomas Anderson
7 minute tracking shot

Watch a music video and note how many cuts are in the 3 minute video.

Sound

Diegetic sound

- Any sound that can be heard by a character within the movie environment
- A character speaks or coughs, a cat meows
- Background noise, traffic, dialogue
- Characters and audience hear the same thing

Nondiegetic sound

- Sound that cannot be heard logically by the characters
- Only intended for the audience
- Often music (the film score)
- Voice-over narration

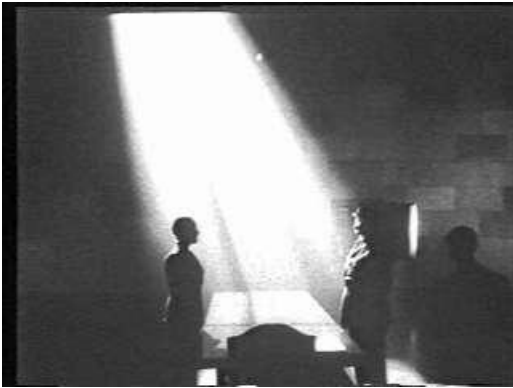
Internal diegetic sound

- Character is talking to himself
- Character remembers thing they heard before
- Only the one character can hear these things

Lighting

Low-key lighting

- Darkness, shadows, and patches of bright light
- Creates moods of suspicion, mystery, and danger
- Horror, detective, film noir – shadows



High-key lighting

- Flooded with light
- Brightness, openness, lack of shadows
- Romantic comedies, musicals
- Characters/situations seen without danger or threat



Neutral Lighting

- Average, neutral, natural

Bottom/side lighting

- Lighting from side or below face
- Dangerous or evil looking
- Can show split personality or moral ambiguity



Front lighting

- Face light directly
- No shadows
- Shows innocence or openness

